Tackling Racial Inequalities in Assessment in Higher Education

A Multi-Disciplinary Case Study

Dr Paul Ian Campbell
Dr Chloe Hawkins
Ms Sadiyo Osman

May 2021

We are Citizens of Change

Contents

Foreword

The Tackling Racial Inequalities in Assessment in Higher Education: A Multi-Disciplinary Case Study report marks an important stage in the university's commitment to eliminating the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) awarding gap. The analysis within the report helps to broaden our understanding of why there are outcome differences for specific assessment types for undergraduate students from different ethnic backgrounds. Importantly, the report challenges notions that lead to the harmful and counterproductive "deficit model", which attributes any lack of academic attainment to issues associated with the student. This report considers and examines the implicit assumptions about undergraduate students and their learning that are often fundamental to the design of HE programmes.

While there are a growing number of attempts to decolonize the curriculum across the Higher Education sector in Britain, few of these projects have explicitly examined 'assessment' as part of colonial systems which contribute to the marginalisation and privilege of different students. The findings of the report provide clear and practical guidance and solutions for ways to improve pre-assessment and post-assessment support for students and for addressing race and ethnicity-based obstacles to assessment parity.

I would like to thank, not only the authors of the report, but also all of the undergraduate students and alumni from across degree programmes in Biology, Physics, Law and Sociology who so openly shared with us their experiences and perceptions of the assessment process and the changes they would like to see.

GWynn

Professor Graham Wynn
Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

Executive summary

Summary of the project's findings

Please note that the accounts included in this report are students' perceptions and interpretations of the educational processes which shape their experiences of assessment. As such, they are not always an accurate account of these processes. However, where this is the case, it is not simply enough for us to dismiss these moments as inaccurate and thus not requiring our attention or action. Their perceptions shape our students' feelings towards and experiences of assessment and how they make sense of their university experience more widely. This includes their efficacy for different assessment types, their ability to achieve success, and their trust and faith (or lack of) in education as something that works for or against them. We as educationalists should use these accounts to make changes where they provide an accurate account of practice which requires improvement. Where perceptions are inaccurate, we need to take this opportunity to show our students how this is not the case.

Data indicates that relationships between race, ethnicity and assessment preference, performance and outcomes are subtle and complex. They manifest in different aspects of the assessment process, which intersect and translate into uneven and unequal levels of access, performance and awards for students from different minority ethnic groups. The following examples illustrate the emergent ways in which race featured in student experiences in relation to assessment across all four disciplines (Biology, Physics, Law and Sociology), upon which our recommendations directly respond.

Assessments

In a general sense, participants' preferences for specific forms of assessment appeared to be strongly connected to their perceived ability to be successful in any given assessment type. This was the case across all disciplines. However, there were certain features within different types of assessment that appeared to chime with, put-off, advantage and disadvantage students from particular minority ethnic groups and on certain courses.

Preferences for exams

Black, South Asian and white STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths-based subjects) and law-based students preferred exams, partly because the 'gap' between the expectations of exam writing at FE and at HE were less pronounced than they were for other assessment types. This familiarity facilitated a clearer understanding of what was required to score well.

The schedule and timetabling of exams (typically at the end of the semester) were also something which was attractive to students across all ethnic groups and disciplines. They asserted that its place in the calendar meant that issues such as when to start preparation and revision, were clearly – albeit unintentionally – signposted (this was not the case with coursework, where students claimed that they were often unsure of at what point in the semester to start working on their assignments). This point was especially applicable to students from black and South Asian heritage backgrounds, who are statistically more likely to need to balance assessment preparation with commuting to the university from outside of Leicester and/or with commitments to work (to supplement the cost of their studies).

By the same token, all STEM and Law students expressed an aversion for coursework-based assessments, including lab reports, because they felt FE had ill-prepared them for these forms of assessment at the undergraduate level. Also, because they considered these types of assessment to be counter-intuitive. Coursework and lab reports, for example, were seen to be an inexact science, that were subjectively assessed and thus had greater potential for assessor bias. Essay questions frequently required deconstructing. Students felt this placed them in greater jeopardy of providing the wrong answer. While it was not entirely surprising

that assessments with more definitive outcomes fitted more easily with the learned pedagogical dispositions and preferences of natural science-based students, this last point does raise important pedagogical questions around the objective of this type of assessment: Are essays to test students' ability to work out questions or to demonstrate the amount and level of knowledge learnt on a module? If the latter, then much more consideration needs to be given to the clarity of the essay questions that we employ.

Coursework, essays, portfolios and lab reports

Coursework was the preferred choice of assessment for the majority of black sociology students in our study, and some white students. In addition to a greater sense of familiarity and confidence with this form of assessment, that was traceable back to their secondary and FE experiences, they argued that coursework gave them the space to fully develop and edit responses over a longer time. This was in direct contrast to their feelings and perceptions of exams, which were seen to be a one chance form of assessment that was equally dependant on their subject knowledge and their ability to perform well on the day.

Presentations and non-anonymised assessments

Preferences for presentations and other forms of non-anonymised assessments were more overtly split along racial and ethnic lines (although it should be remarked that all students expressed a general dislike for group presentations, because grade scores were aggregated across the entire group). White students who enjoyed presentations, appeared to remark solely on the pedagogical advantages of the assessment. Namely, that they could receive instant feedback and show extended knowledge through Q-and-A with the assessor.

However, BAME students were sceptical of all forms of non-anonymised assessments. Importantly, the basis for scepticism was different for students from different minority ethnic backgrounds. This was indicative of the different educational experiences of inclusion borne out from their specific minoritized identities. For example, South Asian biology students of the Islamic faith felt that 'visibility' left them open to ethnic and religious-based anti-education stereotypes and biases, which impacted negatively on their grade outcomes. Black sociology students, however, were concerned that in presentations, grade awards were influenced by their capacity to mask their blackness, and (re)shape their answers and performances in accordance with white middle-class cultural language and capital. Put simply, they believed that being too black in the way that they spoke and performed placed them at a disadvantage.

In this way, students were conscious of the myriad ways in which their raced identities and cultural values might work against them in educational spaces and outcomes – and visibility in assessments limited their capacity to mitigate this reality.

Dissertations

Feelings towards dissertations were ambiguous. On the one hand, all students (that this form of assessment applied to) saw it as a rare opportunity to study an area that was personally, professionally or academically significant to them – and in the case of black students, this was often, but not always, a project that related to their experiences of race. However, there were noteworthy differences between the experiences of white and black students when it came to their levels of confidence in the topic-areas that they could examine, finding suitable supervisors, and to achieving higher level grade outcomes. White students were generally confident that all this was available and could be achieved. Conversely, the black students in our study were much more anxious and sceptical of finding a supervisor who was racially, academically, or generally interested in race. This issue was central to their confidence about having a favourable dissertation experience and positive grade outcome.

Pre-assessment support

Importantly, when students arrive at HE, their initial positive or negative performances in assessments reinforce their preferences for certain forms of assessment. Unless dismantled, these constructed efficacies often stay with students and influence their performances in assessment throughout their time at HE.

Pre-assessment guidance and greater familiarity with the marking criteria emerged from the data as a way to directly create positive perceptions of assessment and to break down negative perceptions of assessment. It was also seen as vital for helping students to learn what constitutes and what is required in assignments that achieve higher level award outcomes. However, the levels of pre-assessment support offered were claimed to be inconsistent across lecturers and modules. In turn, all students called for more structured and consistent guidance for all assessment types, and especially during their transitions from FE to HE.

Additionally, students also felt that the use of what we might describe as 'passive' modelling exercises were often unhelpful. For example, they spoke of some staff making previous 'good' scripts available in repositories for them to see. However, students pointed out that what made these essays 'good' or 'bad' was not always obvious to them. Instead, they called for more 'hands on' exercises, which made clear what it was that made work successful and how this related to the marking criteria.

The comments from some South Asian students of the importance of this kind of pre-assessment support remind us that race and ethnicity are a proxy for wider conditions of social life, which often place students from these backgrounds at a disadvantage in HEIs and in assessment. In this case, that students from BAME backgrounds are more likely to be the first in their households to attend university. In turn, they indicated that assessment support was even more essential for students from their communities. They said that they were less likely to have kin who had been to university and who could provide them with this kind of help, which plugged any lack of pre-assessment support provided in their modules.

Students' calls for more guidance and standardisation of pre-assessment support is in part connected to the fact that since the mid-2000s, education in most comprehensive and FE institutions has largely embraced pedagogical approaches such as Assessment For Learning (AFL). This approach explicitly illustrates to students what is expected at different levels of work (between an A grade response, B grade response, and so on). The basic tenet of AFL-type models of learning, is that for a student to produce higher level work they must first know – or be shown – what it looks like. This pedagogical practice is at times juxtaposed to many of the cultural practices within HEIs more generally, which sometimes views attempts to standardise practice and for assessment 'modelling' as something which stifles talent, innovation and excellence, instead of supporting, nurturing and facilitating it. Given that this experience is relatable to an increasing number of our BAME and general student population, this is an expectation that we have to meet.

Post-assessment support

All students reported that written and oral feedback were important for development, but claimed that in practice, written feedback was often ambiguous, vague and unclear. They claimed it often failed to clearly explain in accessible language what they needed to do to improve, and what this looked like. It failed to clearly distinguish between structural and stylistic issues or to provide clear explanations for how feedback applies and improves future work.

Students remarked that any such issues with written feedback were often circumvented by face to face or oral feedback. This was perceived to be essential, because it provided a platform for students to engage in constructive dialogue with lecturers about their work, explained their received grades, developed

their understanding of the assessment, and provided useful guidance on future assessments. However, the experience of oral feedback was not universal for all students from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

For example, white STEM students impressively felt that oral feedback was a forum where they could openly challenge grade outcomes and question the support offered throughout the module. By contrast, both black and South Asian students did not report the same levels of confidence in seeking out oral feedback or in engaging in such open dialogue with faculty members.

This one example raises important wider questions that we must address. These include: Does oral feedback work equally for all of our students? Which students may or may not feel entitled or comfortable enough to access oral feedback? Is written feedback effective, if it is dependent on oral feedback? It also raises broader questions to the accessibility of oral feedback, and whether it should be employed as an essential – and not a supplementary channel for effective feedback? Importantly, it reveals how the experience of assessment, or aspects of it, can be very different for students from different ethnic (and gendered, classed, abled and so on) backgrounds.

Racialised disparities in accessing curriculums and the consequences for assessment performance

Generally, white students across all focus groups proffered that they were able to easily relate curriculum content, assessments and assessment questions to their own realities and life experiences. This was said to improve their ability to revise, comprehend and conceptualise new theories and for ideas to 'stick'. It was also claimed that it enabled them to more easily work out a question's meaning or enabled them to use their own life experiences to better synthesise or add a critical dimension to their answers – and in turn, produce higher quality responses.

The lack of a sufficiently diverse or decolonised curriculum and faculty meant it was often difficult for black students to be able to connect content and assessments directly to their own lived realities. It was argued that to do so would facilitate more interest in study and foster a deeper understanding and synthesis. In this way, black students are multiply disadvantaged. Black students have to work harder than their peers to connect with both assessment and curriculum content. It should also be noted that the disadvantage for BAME – and advantage for white – students in this regard was remarked upon by both white and BAME students.

The effects of a lack of a racially and ethnically diverse faculty on assessment

Students asserted that there is a visible lack of racial and ethnic diversity within our faculties when compared to the levels of diversity that exists within our student body. A similar point was made about the relatively (low) number of staff who are explicitly interested in race. Both points meant that for black and South Asian students interested studying modules and narratives that directly related to them or finding a project supervisor who was racially or academically 'aligned' with their research interest, was an experience confined predominantly to our white student cohort.

Uneven assessment support as a facilitator for perceptions of Higher Education Institutions as racially hostile spaces

Uneven pre-assessment support and a lack of opportunities to learn and better understand how assignments were assessed, opened up space for students to speculate about how assessments were assessed and graded. White and South Asian Indian students' speculations here tended to centre on what we might describe as pedagogical-based inconsistencies, subjectivity and biases. Put another way, they claimed that variations in awards given to white and BAME students in assessments such as coursework, were

mostly likely due to the fact these types of assessment were inexact sciences, and thus more prone to assessor interpretation and subjectivity. However, black students and South Asian students of the Islamic faith, both speculated that inequalities in grade outcomes were another example of the inequalities that they experience in an education system and society which is routinely and systematically hostile to them. While this may not always be the case, the failure to clearly show what assessments should look like, what constitutes stronger pieces of work, and how assignments are assessed, leaves our assessment practices open to these kinds of speculations, especially by students who are rightly wary of being mistreated because of their ethnic identities.

> "Students asserted that there is a visible lack of racial and ethnic diversity within our faculties."

Tables of recommendations

Pre-assessment support

Full list of recommendations	Physics	Biology	Law	Sociology
Introduce signposts in module guides and weekly schedules for when students might begin to prepare for assessments, especially for students at Level 1 and 2. Or consider introducing formative exercises and activities that prompt students to prepare for assessments *These are short to medium term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)		Introduce signposts in module guides and weekly schedules for when students might begin to prepare for assessments, especially for students at Level 1 and 2. Or consider introducing formative exercises and activities that prompt students to prepare for assessments	Introduce signposts in module guides and weekly schedules for when students might begin to prepare for assessments, especially for students at Level 1 and 2. Or consider introducing formative exercises and activities that prompt students to prepare for assessments	
Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work *These are short to medium term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)	Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work	Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work	Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work	Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work
Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration *These are short to medium term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)	Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration	Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration	Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration	Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration
Introduce more modelling and grading exercises that clearly explain how the marking process works *These are short to medium term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)			Introduce more modelling and grading exercises that clearly explain how the marking process works	
The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion) *These are short to medium term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)	The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion)		The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion)	The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion)

Full list of recommendations	Physics	Biology	Law	Sociology
Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes *These are short to medium term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)	Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes	Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes	Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes	Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes
Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules	Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules	Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules	Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules
Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on. *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.	Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.	Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.	Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.

Post-assessment support

Full list of recommendations	Physics	Biology	Law	Sociology
Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules	Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules	Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules	Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules
Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon	Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon	Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon	Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon
Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues	Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues	Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues	Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues
Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points	Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points	Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points	Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points
Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback	Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback	Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback	Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback
Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit. *These are short term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)	Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit.			

Addressing race and ethnicity based obstacles to assessment parity

Full list of recommendations	Physics	Biology	Law	Sociology
Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)	Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback			
Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit *These are short term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)	Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit	Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit	Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit	Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit
Introduce more modelling and grading exercises that clearly explain how the marking process works *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)		Introduce more modelling and grading exercises that clearly explain how the marking process works		
All staff should more actively encourage and make clear to undergraduate students that they are interested in, and happy to supervise, projects that are centred on their (students') interests, even if the project falls outside of the staff member's research specialisms *These are short to medium term recommendations (6 to 12 months to implement)				All staff should more actively encourage and make clear to undergraduate students that they are interested in, and happy to supervise, projects that are centred on their (students') interests, even if the project falls outside of the staff member's research specialisms
Employ assessment modelling exercises of the type outlined above. This will improve transparency of the ways in which students are assessed and reduce suspicions of racial bias in assessment *These are short to medium term recommendations (0 to 6 months to implement)				Employ assessment modelling exercises of the type outlined above. This will improve transparency of the ways in which students are assessed and reduce suspicions of racial bias in assessment
Consider ways to address structural inequalities and lack of diversity in the faculty staffing These are long term recommendations (12 – 48 months)				Consider ways to address structural inequalities and lack of diversity in the faculty staffing

Summary of reports

Summary of physics report and recommendations

There were two emergent themes from the accounts from the South Asian and white physics student focus groups, which the following recommendations summarise and respond to:

– A preference for exam-based assessment formats from all student groups.

– Inconsistent and unclear written feedback, and inequity in student access to, and engagement with, oral feedback.

Theme one: Preference for exam-based assessments

Both white and South Asian physics participants in the study indicated a preference for exam-based assessment formats. In the main, these preferences were borne out of a greater familiarity accrued during their time within secondary and further education. All this meant that when students arrived at HE, they had a clearer idea of what was expected in exams, and of what stronger and weaker exam-responses might look like – and why.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, both sets of physics students indicated an aversion for coursework and lab reports, as they were seen to be an inexact science and where outcomes were potentially influenced by teacher bias.

They also appeared to dislike these types of assessment because they felt ill-prepared to undertake them and because the marking criteria here was often confusing to them.

Importantly, when students arrived at HE, their initial positive or negative performances in assessments reinforced their preferences for certain forms of assessment. Unless dismantled, these constructed efficacies often stay with students and influence their performances in assessment throughout their time at HE.

Uneven pre-assessment support

Both focus groups felt that pre-assessment support was vital for development and for achieving higher level award outcomes. However, all pointed to uneven levels of pre-assessment support across modules. In turn, they called for more structured and consistent guidance for all assessment types, and especially during their transitions from FE to HE. South Asian students indicated that this support was even more essential for students from their communities, who are often the first from their families to go to university, which means they often do not have the kin networks that their peers might have to help circumvent this lack of support.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To improve student comprehension and confidence in all assessment types and familiarity with what constitutes stronger responses for any given assessment, and

thus (re)construct a more positive efficacy towards all assessments for our students – the following recommendations are suggested:

– Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work.

– Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration.

– The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion).

– Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes.

– Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules.

– Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.

Theme two: Inconsistent and unclear written feedback, and inequity in student access to, and engagement with, oral feedback

Students reported that written and oral feedback were important for development, but in practice written feedback was often ambiguous, vague and unclear. However, issues with written feedback were often circumvented by face to face or oral feedback. This was perceived by students in both focus groups as essential, because it provided a platform for students to engage in constructive dialogue with lecturers about their work, which explained their grades received, developed their understanding of the assessment and provided useful guidance on future assessments. Remarkably, the white students felt that this was a forum where they saw staff as 'colleagues' and not teachers, and one in which they could openly challenge grade outcomes and question the support offered throughout the module. By contrast, South Asian students did not report the same levels of confidence in seeking out oral feedback or in engaging in such open dialogue with faculty members. This situation points to inequities in the place of oral feedback. It also raises questions on the extent to which this platform

(method of feedback) is accessible to all students – and in the same way. More broadly, it shines light how the experience of assessment, or aspects of it, can be very different for different people.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To help make feedback more effective and accessible, the following recommendations are suggested:

– Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules.

– Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon.

– Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues.

– Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points.

– Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback.

– Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit.

Summary of biology report and recommendations

There were three emergent themes from the accounts from the black, South Asian and white biology student focus groups, which the following recommendations summarise and respond to:

– Differences in assessment preferences between white and South Asian biology students, and black biology students.

– Uneven levels of written and oral feedback across modules.

– Perceptions of discrimination towards South Asian students of the Islamic faith in non-anonymised assessments.

Theme one: Differences in assessment preferences between white and South Asian biology students, and black biology students

There were no noticeable preferences for any particular form of assessment among white and South Asian biology student participants. However, essays and exams appeared to be the preferred choice of test for black biology students. This was largely because these were the tests that they were most familiar with, and because the scheduling of exams meant that preparation and revision could be more easily planned. It was perhaps unsurprising that this point was remarked upon favourably by both black and South Asian participants, who are statistically more likely to have to work harder than their white peers to balance assessment preparation with commuting to the university from outside of Leicester and/or with commitments to paid employment (to supplement their studies).

All the participants felt that pre-assessment support was vital for development and for achieving higher level award outcomes. However, all pointed to uneven levels of pre-assessment support across modules. In turn, they called for more structured and more consistent guidance for all assessment types, and especially during their transitions from FE to HE.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To help all students gain a better understanding of when and how to prepare for assessments, the following recommendations are suggested:

– Introduce signposts in module guides and weekly schedules for when students might begin to prepare for assessments, especially for students at Level 1 and 2. Or consider introducing formative exercises and activities that prompt students to prepare for assessments.

– Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work.

– Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration.

– Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes.

– Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules.

– Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change – even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.

Theme two: Uneven written and oral feedback across modules

All three focus groups pointed to uneven levels of written and oral feedback across modules. Useful written feedback was described as thorough, concise and meaningful. It contained clear signposts to errors made, but also provided clear instructions for how to improve future work. Conversely, unhelpful or 'problematic' feedback was described as being vague.

For white students, any issues with written feedback were expunged by oral or face to face feedback. This was described as clear. It provided instruction on what they needed to improve and what this might look like. White students also felt that within this forum, they could challenge assessors/lecturers on the grades that they had been awarded, as well as challenge the levels of support offered and received throughout the module.

Importantly, this did not appear to be a feature of the post-assessment experience for the South Asian and black biology participants in this study. This raises important questions as to whether-or-not oral feedback works in the same way for all our students. And which students may or may not feel entitled and comfortable enough to access oral feedback. It also raises questions around the effectiveness of written feedback if it is dependent on oral feedback.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To help make feedback more effective, the following recommendations are suggested:

– Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules.

– Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon.

– Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues.

– Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points.

– Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback.

Theme three: Perceptions of discrimination towards South Asian students of the Islamic faith in non-anonymised assessments

South Asian students of the Islamic faith were wary of non-anonymised assessments, as they felt that 'visibility' left them open to ethnic and religious anti-education stereotypes and biases, which impacted negatively on the grade outcomes they were awarded. Suspicions of ill treatment, especially of Muslim students, was a point proffered by all the South Asian students in the focus group.

A perceived lack – or absence – of clarity in the marking process appears to have created a space for students to speculate on what factors are at play in determining grade outcomes for their work. This has contributed to a general scepticism and fuelled suspicions of foul play, especially among some minority ethnic students who perceive HE as another space in the UK which marginalises and discriminates against them along the axes of race and religion.

To address this situation, more work needs to be devoted to improving transparency, communication, and comprehension of how assignments are assessed. This will help to reduce suspicions of racial bias and discrimination in assessment among BAME students.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To achieve this, the following recommendations are suggested:

– Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit.

– Introduce more modelling and grading exercises that clearly explain how the marking process works.

Summary of sociology report and recommendations

Three themes emerged from the accounts offered in the white and black sociology student focus groups, which the following recommendations respond:

– Preferences for assessment are connected to a perceived ability to be successful or unsuccessful in that specific form of assessment.

– Inconsistent feedback on assignments across modules.

– Race is a determining factor in the black sociology students' experience of assessment.

Theme one: Preferences for assessment are connected to a perceived ability to be successful or unsuccessful in that specific form of assessment

Perhaps unsurprisingly, black and white sociology student preferences for specific forms of assessment appeared to be linked to their perceived ability to be successful in that form of assessment. In most cases, students' higher or lower senses of efficacy for certain assessment types appeared to be closely linked to their prior positive or negative experiences in particular types of 'test'. It was also connected to how much they understood with regards to what was required to be successful (achieve higher grade outcomes) in that mode of assessment. Importantly, when students arrived at HE, their initial positive or negative performances in assessments as undergraduates often served to reinforce and further compound the pre-existing perceptions of a proclivity for, and ability to be successful in, certain forms of assessment. These perceptions of efficacy are resilient and unless dismantled, can often stay with them throughout their time at HE.

Pre-assessment guidance appear to be central for helping to create more positive perceptions of assessments, and to dismantle many of the negative perceptions of assessment that students often either bring with them, or form early on in their undergraduate careers. However, the levels of existing pre-assessment support offered and/or available to students were claimed to be inconsistent, and differed greatly between different lecturers and modules. While both sets of students praised this kind of support when available, they also and unequivocally called for more even and more consistent levels of pre-assessment guidance across their degree programme.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To demystify assessment – that is to make transparent what is expected in all assessment types and what constitutes stronger responses for any given assessment, and thus (re)construct a more positive efficacy towards all assessments for the students we teach – the following recommendations are suggested:

– Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work.

– Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration.

– The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion).

– Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes.

– Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules.

– Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.

Theme two: Inconsistent feedback across modules

Both sets of students reported that the quality of written feedback received differed greatly between assessors and often required oral feedback to aid clarity of what was being instructed.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To help make feedback more effective, the following recommendations are suggested:

– Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules.

– Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon.

– Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues.

– Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points.

– Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback.

Theme three: Race is a determining factor in the black sociology students' experience of assessment

Race was a determining factor in the surveyed black sociology students' experiences of assessment in the following ways. Finding a supervisor who was racially or academically 'aligned' with their research area was central to students' confidence about having a favourable experience, and positive grade outcome or vice versa.

In assessments where black students are visible to assessors, students were concerned that their grades are determined by their perceived capacity to (re)shape their answers and performances in accordance with white middle-class cultural language and capital.

The lack of a sufficiently diverse or decolonised curriculum and faculty meant it was often difficult for black students to connect all assessments directly to their own lived realities. It was argued that to do so would facilitate more interest in study and foster a deeper understanding and synthesis. By contrast, white students were conscious of the fact that they were able to relate the vast majority of the curriculum content back to their own lived realities. In this way, black students are multiply disadvantaged. Black students have to work harder than their peers to connect with both assessment and curriculum content.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To address these issues, the following recommendations are suggested:

– Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit.

– All staff should more actively encourage and make clear to undergraduate students that they are interested in, and happy to supervise, projects that are centred on their (students') interests, even if the project falls outside of the staff member's research specialisms.

– Employ assessment modelling exercises of the type outlined above. This will improve transparency of the ways in which students are assessed and reduce suspicions of racial bias in assessment.

– Consider ways to address structural inequalities and lack of diversity in the faculty staffing.

Summary of law report and recommendations

Three themes emerged from the accounts offered in the white and black law student focus groups, which the following recommendations respond:

– Preferences for exam-based assignments.

– Calls for greater consistency in feedback across all modules and for all forms of assessment.

– Disparities in relating curricular and assessments to life experiences between white and black Law students.

Theme one: Preferences for exam-based assignments

Law students in both focus groups stated that exams were the most familiar form of assessment to them. For them, the 'gap' between the expectations of exam writing at FE and at HE was less than it was in other forms of assessment. Students had a clearer understanding of what was required to score well here.

The schedules of exams at the end of each semester meant that students had a clearer idea of when to begin revision. They could also better fit revision around other commitments. This was an especially important consideration for students from certain BAME communities, who are statistically more likely to come from more challenging socio-economic contexts.

Coursework was considered to be significantly more complicated and less intuitive than when they were at the FE level. For example, essay questions required deconstruction. This left students at a higher chance of providing an answer that did not respond directly to the question, and in turn, put them at a higher risk of producing a lower grade response. This was compounded by the fact that students felt that essays were marked in a more subjective manner than exams.

Both sets of participants felt pre-assessment support was essential to enable them to successfully achieve higher grade outcomes. However, they also claimed that the levels of guidance and support offered depended greatly on the individual lecturer. Consequently, they called for more consistency in the amount and quality of pre-assessment support made available to them.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To improve student comprehension of what is expected in all assessment types, and student confidence and understanding of what constitutes stronger responses for any given assessment, the following recommendations are suggested*:

– Introduce signposts in module guides and weekly schedules for when students might begin to prepare for assessments, especially for students at Level 1 and 2.

– Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work.

– Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration.

– The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion).

– Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes.

– Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules.

– Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level l and at Level 2, and so on.

Theme two: Calls for greater consistency in feedback across all modules and for all forms of assessment

All students called for greater consistency in written feedback across all modules and for all assessments. The students outlined the following as what they considered to be good written feedback practice:

– Written feedback that is clear, concise and constructive.

– Written feedback that is focused on what they needed to do to improve and what this looked like.

– Written feedback that is less focused on what they had done well.

– Written feedback that distinguishes between structural and stylistic issues.

– Written feedback that provides clear explanations for how feedback applies to, and improves, future work.

– Written feedback that does not require oral feedback for clarification.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To help make feedback more effective, the following recommendations are suggested*:

– Introduce and improve consistency across the programme on what information is provided and prioritised in written feedback across modules.

– Written feedback should be detailed, concise and avoid jargon.

– Written feedback should provide practical guidance and examples of ways to improve work in future assessments and make distinctions between structural and stylistic issues.

– Written feedback should be clear enough not to require oral feedback to explain or clarify points.

– Oral feedback should be employed as a complementary mode of feedback.

Theme three: Disparities in relating curricular and assessments to life experiences between white and black Law students

White Law students felt that they were able to more easily relate assessments, assessment questions and curriculum content to their own realities and life experiences. This conferred three main advantages in relation to being able to produce high(er) quality answers:

– It improved their ability to revise, comprehend and conceptualise new theories and for ideas to stick.

– It enabled them to work out a question's meaning more easily.

– It enabled them to use their own life experiences to better synthesise or add a critical dimension to their answers.

This was not a feature of the black experience and represents a noteworthy inequity in the assessment experience between the two groups of students in this study.

Recommendations for assessment practice:

To begin to address these issues, the following recommendations are suggested*

– Engage with the university's decolonizing toolkit.

The context for the report

Systemic racial and ethnic inequalities in UK Higher Education Institutions

The Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the murder of Breeona Taylor and George Floyd by the police in the US during the summer of 2020, focused public attention on the racial inequalities that exist abroad and at home in the UK. Systemic inequalities between white and minority ethnic communities endure in all aspects of social life in Britain, including health, housing, employment, and in education. As educators in a university where over 50% of our students are from black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, much of our attention should be focused on addressing the ways that many of our students are disadvantaged in higher education, and to creating a more equitable university experience for all students (Pilkington 2018).

In a general sense, students from minority ethnic backgrounds in Britain have a much less positive experience in Higher Education than their white peers (NUS 2019). In addition to lower rates of satisfaction and less positive experiences of belonging, BAME students also experience noteworthy differences in their degree outcomes when compared to their white peers – and even when they possess the same prior qualifications (Mahmud and Gagnon 2020). Despite this reality, a recent

Guardian survey of 128 UK universities, found that only 11 had committed to directly addressing racial inequality and to 'decolonization' reforms across the whole institution in ways that exceeded the scope of their pre-existing equality and diversity policies. As Bhopal (2018) contends, much of the decolonizing work that UK universities have committed to have been tied up with wider diversity policies and fallen short of achieving meaningful change for students (and staff) from BAME communities.

Decolonizing the curriculum

It is fair to say that there is much debate as to what decolonization is, and how it translates into practical and explicit policies for change (Le Grange 2018, Bhambra et al 2018). Put most simply, we view decolonizing as the apparatus – or tool – that enables us to forensically and meaningfully address the multiplicity of racial inequalities that are experienced by students of colour in Higher Education.

Narrowing our focus solely on decolonizing the curriculum and pedagogy – that is on what and how we teach – the consensus view is that this is a process of ensuring our curriculum includes alternative ways of explaining, documenting and thinking about the world and includes a greater plurality of perspectives (The Open University 2019). It should also engage and directly connect to the life worlds of all the students we serve, educate and seek

to inspire. In this way, the Keele University 'Decolonizing the Curriculum Network' offers the following useful definition for what the aims, objectives and purpose of decolonised curricula might be:

> Decolonization involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems. It is not 'integration' or simply the token inclusion of the intellectual achievements of non-white cultures. Rather, it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to the making of space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems. It's a culture shift to think more widely about why common knowledge is what it is, and in doing so adjusting cultural perceptions and power relations in real and significant ways.

As knowledge producers, universities influence what counts as legitimate knowledge. Mignolo (2009) argues, that the narratives we produce are too often presented as universal, neutral and as a singular and objective truth. According to Peters (2018, 254), this is more accurately described as a 'white' and Eurocentric knowledge-base, that is predominantly produced by 'white authors'. Moreover, it normalises and privileges white history, cultural values, norms, practices, perspectives, experiences, and voices. While at the same time, it marginalises other forms of knowing – albeit in varying ways. This situation has a profound impact on who and which students the academy directly relates to, works for, privileges and excludes in its processes, procedures, and award outcomes.

The award gap

The award gap is reference to the significant differences in degree award outcomes obtained usually by home (or domiciled) BAME students in comparison to white equivalents. Broecke and Nicholls (2007) assert that ethnicity is the most determining factor for award outcome differences, even when factors such as age, gender, disability, prior attainment, subject, HE institution, deprivation, level of qualifications, modes of study and term-time accommodation are all accounted for.

Similarly, the recent 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] Student Attainment at UK Universities: Closing the Gap' report found that in 2017-18, there were significant differences in the award outcomes obtained by domiciled BAME students compared to their white equivalents. When all award outcome scores were aggregated, there was a 13.2% outcome difference between the white student population (80.9%) and aggregated BAME student population (67.7%) that year.

Similar patterns of outcome difference were present in the award outcomes of students from different ethnic backgrounds who had entered university with the same

prior qualifications. Approximately 93% of white students who entered university with an AAA score at A Level, were awarded a first class or 2.1 degree. This compared to 87% and 85% for Asian and black heritage students, respectively.

This pattern of outcome difference by ethnicity remained largely consistent for students who entered HE with lower A level qualifications and for those who had entered university with the same BTEC or International Baccalaureate qualifications. Moreover, the data indicated that the lower the like-for-like qualifications for students entering HE (e.g. DDD at A level), the wider the degree award gap outcome was between students from different ethnic groups.

BAME students are not a homogenous group and have very different experiences of education and award outcomes. For example, the same study also revealed that 57% of students who self-identified as Black or Black British African were awarded a first class or upper second degree (2.1). The figure was 59.2% for students who were Black or Black British Caribbean. Some 66.6 % of students who were Asian or Asian British-Pakistan were awarded a first or 2.1. This was the case for 75.7% of students who self-identified as Asian or Asian British-Indian, and 76.6% for students of Chinese heritage.

Data from the HESA highlights differences in outcomes within 'singular' race and ethnic groups. For example, 59.2 per cent of black or Black British Caribbean students achieved a first or a 2.1 in 2017/2018, compared to 57 per cent of Black or Black British African students in the same year (HESA 2019). A similar picture of heterogeneity emerges among South Asian students. While 75.7 per cent of South Asian or British Asian Indian students achieved a 2.1 or first, only 67.5 of South Asian Bangladeshi and 66.6 per cent of South Asian Pakistani students achieved an upper second or first-class degree (HESA 2019). These variations support Stevenson and Whelan's (2013) observation that using the term BAME to understand minority ethnic assessment can often mask the full complexity of the award gap for these students (also see Campbell 2015, 2016 and 2019).

Contributing factors for the award gap

As educationalists we must not draw simplistic – or essentialist – conclusions about the implied relationship between race, ethnicity and academic ability (Campbell 2020a). The emergent patterns discussed above, are not the result of a person's potential and work ethic. Likewise, we must also avoid outdated 'deficit' model thinking because, according to Mountford-Zimdar et al (2015), these logics tend to frame inequities in attainment to deficiencies among certain students or communities (NUS 2019, 16). Such approaches are problematic, not least because they place the cause and

thus responsibility for outcome differences exclusively on the student, rather than focus on the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within this process. In doing so, these approaches obscure and overlook the cultures, pedagogies, structures that facilitate and maintain systemic racial inequalities within HEIs (Richardson 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, Bhopal 2018, Doharty et al 2019).

Conversely, Singh (2011) asserts that disparities in attainment are the result of myriad cultural, institutional and structural factors, overlaid with direct and indirect racism. Similarly, Cousin and Cureton (2012) point to explanatory factors, such as effective relationships, pedagogy, psycho-social barriers, and social and cultural capital. These include diminished sense of belonging, institutionally racist policies and practices, lack of diversity in faculties and leadership, exclusionary curricular, financial factors, unconscious biases, and so on (see for example, Universities UK and National Union of Students 2019).

Assessment as a contributor to the marginalisation and privilege of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds

Much less attention has been given to the place of assessment within the wider discussion of the award gap. There are some noteworthy exceptions (see for example Richardson 2008). For example, there are a number of studies that have focused on the influence of teacher bias, stereotyping and whiteness, and lower teacher expectations on BAME students' assessment performances (see Connor et al 2004, MacNell et al 2015, Arday and Mirza 2018, Mengel et al 2018).

However, less critical attention has been given specifically to 'assessments' and to the processes of assessment in HEIs. Seldom have these been examined as part of colonial systems, which contribute to the marginalisation and privilege of students from different race and ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, we know relatively little with regards to rather routine questions, such as: How do assessments contribute to, or produce, wider outcome differences between BAME and white students? Why do certain heritage students, on average, appear to perform better in certain forms of assessments over others? The extent to which barriers to 'higher-grade' BAME performance are intrinsic to specific assessment types or connected to wider pedagogical practice? Or to the ways in which wider social and cultural factors, such as socio-economic background, cultural capital, location and so on, intersect, influence and may contribute to the performance of different BAME-heritage students in particular forms of assessment? Drawing on interview data of over 44 South Asian, black and white biology, physics, law, and sociology students, this scoping report looks to provide some introductory responses to these final questions.

Our report

The following report focuses on widening our understanding of the award gap through an examination of why there appears to be an outcome difference in specific undergraduate assessment types in relation to the ethnic background of the student, and on understanding the reasons which underpin this trend.

A qualitative approach was employed for a number of methodological, analytical and theoretical reasons. Racialised and ethnic identities are widely recognised as ontologically fluid and thus complex aspects of peoples' lives. Consequently, the lived experiences and daily realities of minority-ethnic groups in social – and in this case educative – environs are often inadequately captured by quantitative data alone (Campbell 2015). The consensus among sociologists and educationalists is that to obtain a critical comprehension of minority-ethnic students' experiences in education, researchers should employ qualitative approaches, such as in-depth questioning in addition to quantitative data sets. Moreover, we must acknowledge the extent to which BAME-heritage students are heterogenous, and as such we must also avoid aggregating the educative experiences of students from different communities (Campbell 2020b).

Mindful of these important theoretical, methodological and sampling considerations, data are drawn from twelve focus groups interviews, and 6 one to one interviews with undergraduate, and alumni students respectively. The students in our sample were from three different ethnic communities (1: African and African-Caribbean heritage, 2: British South Asian heritage and 3: White British), from across four different degree courses: Biology, Physics, Law, and Sociology. It should be noted that a combination of Industrial Action in Spring 2020, and the COVID-19 outbreak, both impacted on student availability during the recruitment phase of the study. This meant that it was not possible to include a representative focus group for all minority ethnic groups across all four of the degree programmes included in the study.

The following data will help provide a starting point for further study. It will also provide a more rounded and critical understanding of the award gap in degree outcomes across different schools at the University of Leicester with regards to the relationship between race, ethnicity and assessment. This will aid the production of more meaningful and effective practice, pedagogy and policy recommendations.

Findings: Individual subject focus group reports

Physics focus groups

White physics student focus group

Types of assessment

White physics students showed a clear preference for (standard and multiple-choice) exam and open book assessment formats. This appeared to be due to a greater familiarity with, and prior knowledge of, standard format exams. This had typically been accrued during their time in compulsory or further education. Consequently, students in the focus group pointed out that they had a clearer understanding of what was expected in answers for exams and open-book assessments, and of what stronger and weaker responses might look like – and why. This clarity seemed to reduce levels of anxiety and boosted confidence in relation to performing well and producing higher quality work.

"I think exams [are my favourite assessment type]. I've been doing them all through school up until now. It's a very familiar process. Whereas report writing, I think I'm still working out exactly what's expected of me when it comes to doing them."

"I've only ever done the exams. I've never done lab reports and stuff like that, or coursework. My A-Levels, none of it was coursework, it was all exams. That's all I'm used to. So, doing exams doesn't really stress me out or anything, I feel a lot more confident with them over other things."

By contrast, lab reports and coursework were the least favourite forms of assessment. This was attributed to a lack of familiarity and in turn knowledge of how to do these types of assessments and how to do them well. This was compounded by the fact that participants felt that some of their lecturers often assumed that they knew how to do these types of assessment tasks, and thus provided little pre-assessment guidance.

"I remember in first year, the first lab report we were asked to write, just impending doom because I'd never written a lab report before. I had no idea how you were supposed to structure it. They didn't really help. But as you go through the years, you obviously have to write more reports and you just kind of generally get used to it."

"We have a vague [idea of what lab reports are]. You must include introduction, things like that. But there's not really strict guidelines on what style's preferred. For example, some people write in passive tense and some people write in the other. So, it just depends."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the physics students also disliked coursework-based assessments because they were seen to be less of an exact science. In turn, the marking process for coursework and lab reports were believed to be dependent on both the content of the answer and the subjective preferences of the individual assessor.

Coursework was viewed as less secure ground for the award of higher level grade outcomes. All this appeared to contribute to participants favouring assessments, such as exams or maths-based tests, which have a more identifiably right or a wrong answer.

"Yes, I prefer [exams]. You've got a definitive right or wrong. I just prefer maths to writing out stuff. Because again it is just down to opinion. It's quite ambiguous when people are marking it. It's just down to if they like how you write, your certain style. If they don't like that, they can hold it against you and stuff. But when it comes to physics exams or maths, just with numbers. That's an answer. There's no question about it."

"So say if you're doing a lab report, then there's obviously certain criteria to be met. But I feel like it's slightly more subjective in how it's marked by someone. One person could look at it and think you've written a great report, and then another person could come along and say, actually this isn't quite what I was looking for in a lab report. Purely because one person's opinion of your work could vary from another person's. Whereas if you did a test, an exam, the answer is either right or wrong..."

Pre-assessment guidance

When faced with new assessments, students felt that they received uneven levels of pre-assessment support and guidance. In turn, they felt that they were too often left to learn through trial and error. This meant that when students were confronted with an unfamiliar form of assessment, such as a lab report and coursework, they were often anxious about basic issues such as: How to go about doing the task? What does a good lab report or coursework look like? How to achieve higher level grades?

"We have a vague [idea of what lab reports are]. You must include introduction, things like that. But there's not really strict guidelines on what style's preferred. For example, some people write in passive tense and some people write in the other. So, it just depends".

"I know that's kind of a bit of a controversial subject inside the physics department itself, a lot of the students want the mark scheme, so they know exactly how to do the questions. But they're [faculty] adamant that they won't give them to us. We get numerical answers. So, some of the questions... if it's like a question where we have to show something, unless it's been covered in lectures or in the recommended textbook, we're kind of a bit stuck."

The perceived lack of clarity, especially for more coursework-based assessments, was compounded by a marking-criteria that students often found difficult to understand. These two factors appeared to further fuel suspicions that coursework-based assessments were prone to interpretation and lecturer bias.

"I think just to add on what participant three was saying, when you write a report there's a marking criteria, but it's not standardised... So, it is just luck of the draw as to whether you get someone marking it that likes your style or not."

Post-assessment support: Feedback

Students reported that written feedback on assignments was important for development but in practice often left them unsure of what they had done well and where they needed improvement. This form of feedback was described as sometimes being vague and in the case of exams, not provided.

However, issues around perceived lack of clarity in written feedback were often circumvented by face to face (oral) feedback. Students were extremely positive of this feedback method. Oral feedback was praised because it resolved issues or gaps in the written feedback, and provided a platform for students to engage in constructive dialogue with lecturers about their work, which explained their grades received, developed their understanding of the assessment and provided useful guidance on future assessments.

This forum was facilitated by a remarkably positive relationship between staff and students (one student, for example, explained that she saw her lecturers more as colleagues than as teachers). The focus group expressed that in this forum, they felt supported and had no hesitation in seeking support from their lecturers. Students impressively described oral feedback as a space where they could challenge grades, offer constructive criticism on the support that they received during the module and where they would not be judged negatively (for doing so).

"But yes, I know just about every single one of them [lecturers] and they're all very friendly. So, I don't know if it's the same for every department, but we have an open-door policy so we can go and talk to them anytime we want about pretty much anything. And I think that's probably the best thing, that you build a rapport with any lecturer and you can ask them for help about any subject."

"I feel like as well, I'm not being judged so much. I'm not worried ... I feel like if I go wrong somewhere ... whoever is assessing them will look at it and feel like they want to help me more. As opposed to, I'm being criticised, if that makes sense... I think, I remember being told in foundation year, to think of lecturers as my colleagues, rather than my superiors and I completely agree with that frankly. I think if you can see them as being level to you, then it takes away any intimidation that I might have when I'm being assessed as such."

South Asian physics student focus group

Types of assessment

The South Asian physics student focus group reported that open book exams were their preferred form of assessment. It was argued that it provided students space to conceptualise and apply theory and produce higher-quality answers. Preferences and feelings of self-efficacy for other forms of assessment were mixed, and for the following reasons. Participants bemoaned that there was a lack of clarity and guidance on how to structure and successfully 'do' assessments that were new to them. They felt that in most cases, previous educational experiences had not prepared them for the majority of ways in which they were assessed when at university.

Pre-assessment guidance

Their aversion to other assessment types, such as essays and coursework, appeared to stem from a lack of familiarity with these 'new' modes of examination. It also derived from what students described as a lack of consistent pre-assessment support. In turn, they called for more pre-assessment guidance which modelled how to do new assessments and importantly provided clear guidance on how to do them well.

> "It would really help to see examples then we know what they actually expect from us. Because we haven't done coursework before, because we have done A levels, so we don't have any idea of what they expect from us. So, if we see examples, we get an idea of what they expect from us…"

In the absence of a clear understanding of what stronger pieces of work 'look like', or what constitutes stronger and weaker coursework and essay responses, students speculated this to mean that these types of assessment were a less exact science and assessed according to more subjective marking criteria. They argued that assessment outcomes here were influenced by the individual preferences of the assessor. In turn, coursework represented a less secure method for securing higher grades than exams.

> "I feel like it depends on the person marking it. Like what someone might find it to be really good, and someone else might think it's not good at all."

Students argued that pre-assessment guidance was especially important for South Asian students, as many were the first in their family to go to university. As such, they did not have family members who had been to university who could help them with such matters. While we must be careful of not overgeneralising here, the accounts corroborate with a wider consensus that a higher percentage of students from South Asian households are the first to enter HE compared to white peers. They also indicated that a higher percentage of students from these communities are less likely to have the same kinds of wider cultural resources and kin networks to draw upon to plug the gaps in their knowledge around assessment.

> "Some of the (South Asian) students they don't really have that support at home because their parents have never done a degree before. So it's really helpful to get that support from the lecturers. Otherwise where else can we get that support from?"

Post-assessment support: Feedback

Students felt that both written and oral feedback were important tools for development and success. However, they felt that written feedback was not always clear, and that the language used in written feedback was at times difficult to penetrate for some. They argued that it provided little help for enabling them to comprehend why their assignments had received a particular grade score, and how to improve (and what did that improvement look like).

South Asian students asserted that oral feedback from lecturers was essential for breaking down and making sense of feedback and feed forward instructions. However, their accounts indicated that, in practice, oral feedback was not viewed as a safe or secure forum. Students remarked that they often did not feel confident in approaching staff or see oral feedback as a forum to participate in open dialogue, where they could ask questions freely without feeling that judgements might be made about their intelligence (or lack of) by their lecturers.

> "It was nice to talk to them [lecturers] about it, but I'd feel scared to ask them. The lecturers that I know, I talk to. The lecturers that I know I talk to. But some of the other ones, I maybe hesitate. I don't know… Just scared to ask… [They would] probably think I am silly."

Biology focus groups

Black biology student focus group

Types of assessment

Black biology students showed a preference for exam and essay form assessments. This was tied to a sense of efficacy which appeared to derive from a combination of their performances in these types of assessment while at Leicester and in previous education. They remarked that where the examination period was scheduled in the timetable, it gave them a clearer idea of when to start planning, preparing and revising. They could also better compartmentalise exam preparation around other work and family commitment. Students who preferred essays attributed this to the fact that this type of examination provided more space to formulate, edit and develop work.

"You know with my exams, even if I'm a little bit behind there's that time that I get to just quickly catch up and then revise for my exams."

"Essay type, I think. It gives me more time to plan. To structure it well. And to also go through it and re-jiggle bits that I don't like."

"I like writing essays. I am good at them. And I am quick. So, when we have coursework and they give us only two weeks to do it, that 5,000 words, I am on it. And within three days, I have written [it]."

Pre-assessment guidance

The black biology participants in the study wanted more structured and consistent preparatory support and guidance for all assessment types, and especially during their transitions from FE to HE. While they pointed to some examples of effective support, this often varied between staff, modules and different types of assessment. For example, students remarked that there appeared to be less meaningful support for exams over other forms of assessment.

"I do think some assessments they do give more help. But I don't know if that's just based on different lecturers just deciding to go more in depth and have more sessions for particular assessment and coursework."

"I haven't written a long piece of writing. Which, obviously, it's different. I understand. Because it's Biology. There's less storytelling, if you like. But Psychology and English were more long kind of pros that I had to write. So, it's a bit different. It's difficult for me to adjust."

"If I feel like there is no support from the actual module conveners, or there's no effort to have little support groups, or something, in the run up to exams."

"There are special ways to write it that you would have been taught... But for people who may not have been here, or who may have come to England for uni, they would not know that. Because they wouldn't have been taught that in their English wherever else they came from. So, it's a barrier for them."

Students felt that where pre-assessment support was available, it often focused on preparing them for a test, rather than focusing on how to 'do' it – that is, how to

construct higher scoring responses. For example, one participant noted how their mock exams helped them get used to the conditions of taking an exam, but provided little help or insight into how to construct a higher grade answer, or for what types of knowledge they were being tested on (content, argument, criticality, rote, and so on). Furthermore, that grade distinctions, rubric and descriptors were not always clear or fully explained.

> "We did do a couple of mocks before. For example, before the January examination period. We did a mock in December. And then they didn't release the paper after, back to us. So, I was a bit confused."

> "The actual like description to move up bands is quite vague. And it's also quite subjective. Is that the word? One person could think that one person's work is 100%, a first."

Post-assessment support: Feedback

Students remarked that written feedback was often vague and not precise enough to provide meaningful guidance. They felt that written feedback was a reactive learning tool instead of proactive. The participants within the focus group were equally concerned with what they had done wrong, as well as with what they had to do for improvement, and importantly, with being shown what 'improvement' looked like.

> "With coursework, when we get our marks back we have little side comments. So it's 'oh you could have done this better'. They're still not explaining to us like how..."

South Asian biology student focus group

Types of assessment

South Asian biology students showed no particular preference for any assessment type. With regards to exams, students liked the fact that this was a continuation of the types of assessment that they had become used to in further education and the fact that exams were scheduled at the end of the semester. This meant that students could better compartmentalise assessment preparation. Also, sitting exams was described as a relatively short and therefore less painful experience.

Students also enjoyed essays because they gave them time to formulate, edit and develop their answers and produce more expansive and thorough work.

> "I personally prefer exams because it's for one day. You only have to revise for that one exam. It's not like an essay where it's continuous, so it's out of the way. As soon as you've done the exam it's out of the way, I guess."

> "[I]n essays, I can go back and forth. If I'm not feeling well on one day, then on the next day I can sit for a longer time and try and work through."

However, assessments where students' identities were visible were problematic for some South Asian students. Students who described as being of the Islamic faith felt that 'visibility' left them open to ethnic and religious anti-education stereotypes and biases, which impacted negatively on the grade scores that they were awarded. Suspicions of ill treatment especially of Muslim students were subscribed to by all the South Asian students in the focus group.

"They have a very Muslim name. But with them they've actually had multiple experiences where they feel like their mark has been a bit unfair. Especially because we literally do the work together, and the stuff that we come up with is very similar and our ideas are all the same. So surely if what we're coming up with is the same (answer), there shouldn't be a big 30% difference."

Pre-assessment guidance

Participants indicated that their ability to gain higher grade outcomes would be improved with more pre-assessment support for all forms of examinations. This was not however a call for generic support, but for module and assignment specific guidance. The focus group pointed to noteworthy differences between the types of preparatory support received between modules. There were examples of both helpful and less helpful practice here. Helpful guidance was described as support that focused on making clear what was required in higher grade answers.

"They don't really tell us much on what a weak and strong one looks like. They don't give us any examples on, this is a strong answer, this is a weaker answer. So in terms of that, we don't get any."

"This last January we had exams, and they didn't really provide mocks or a sample assessment for that exam, and the excuse was that they wanted us to learn how to think rather than learn the answers from past papers, or the sample paper. But I disagree with their reasoning for it, and I think it would have been better to have a sample paper before the mock…"

Post-assessment support: Feedback

Feedback (written and oral) was considered to be essential in assessment performance and development. Students pointed to examples of useful written feedback as thorough and concise, with clear signposts to what they had done wrong, instructions on how to improve, and how this related to future work.

Less-helpful practice included written feedback that they considered vague and not directly related to the grading criteria. It was focused on what they had done well or wrong but provided little instruction – or feed forward – for what improvements were required and importantly, what they looked like (examples). For example, the difference between feedback that highlights a weak sentence and one which illustrates why it is weak and explains how it might be improved – e.g. try to limit the sentence to one or two points maximum.

"[S]ome feedback is just telling me the answers. Right or wrong sort of thing. But then there's some which are actually quite good."

"[S]ometimes the feedback is very specific to that assessment, so you can't really use it for another assessment."

[The marker might say:] 'I need to be more concise' But they don't really specify… like which way? If it was like the whole essay? Or just parts of it?

"[G]ood feedback would be telling me what exactly I've done wrong. Not exact. You can say that you've added extra information in the introduction, or they can say that your sentencing wasn't accurate, or grammatical errors. Stuff like that."

"When they are marking us, they tell us that 'this is strong', 'this is weak'. But it's not justified. They're not writing what is good and what is bad. They just say, 'this is bad', and 'this is good'. But why is it good? Why is it bad? Also, they don't tell us how exactly they're marking us. Where did I lose my marks? In that whole essay, it's a 2,000 word essay, how am I supposed to know where I lost my marks?"

All interviewees agreed that oral feedback and wider support was essential for them in assessment performance. They were key in helping them to unpack many of the pre- and post-assignment issues that students raised above. However, they reported that the amount of and opportunities for oral feedback also differed greatly among staff.

White biology student focus group

Types of assessment

There were no clear preferences for any particular form of assessment among the white biology students in this study. Interestingly, students did not appear to favour assessments by issues of familiarity or pragmatism as was the case with other focus groups. They instead gravitated to particular types of tests because they perceived them as being suited to their 'innate' and 'natural' dispositions, preferred learning styles and preferred ways of learning. For example, continuous assessment was popular because regular testing helped students to keep up to date with module content and to stay on top of their studies. Presentations were enjoyed because of the real time feedback that students could receive. This was seen as an added opportunity for them to show deeper knowledge, typically through the question and answer component of the assessment, where assessors can ask probing questions. Others preferred the practical based learning that came with conducting experiments and lab reports. This was especially enjoyed by students who self-identified as more kinaesthetic learners.

"I definitely think you do better in modules you enjoy and assessments you enjoy…"

"Well, exams, I just don't… It's not even that I can't do exams, because I can. I have got a good memory. I just don't enjoy them."

"At the minute, I have two continuous assessment modules. So, I basically do an assessment every two weeks or so. So, I do have a lot of deadlines, but it helps me keep on top of my work."

"Presentations give you good feedback in the sense that I often get told that I'm quick when I'm talking, so I'll have to try and slow myself down for the next ones."

"I really like the lab reports because I think participant one touched on it earlier, you do the hands-on experiment and then you write about your experience doing it. It's a lot easier to write about something you've done rather than them just giving you a question, and being like, oh write an article about this."

Pre-assessment guidance

Students reported inconsistencies in the levels and amount of support and guidance that they received from module convenors when they were introduced to new forms of assessment. In some cases, support was described as excellent and in other examples, as unhelpful. It should be noted that students in the focus group recognized that their programme of study had made attempts to improve the level of support and guidance. Despite this, they called for more specific and standardized forms of pre-assessment support that included: exercises which clearly illustrated what stronger and weaker assignments looked like and that explained why they were; clearer and assessment specific marking criteria and a more hands-on approach to helping them to understand it; consistent guidance across all modules; and summary slides in lecture notes that signposted them to 'need to know information' to help guide revision.

"My module this semester, we had a style of writing [assessment] we never had to experience before. We've never been faced with before. And we got no support as to how to go about writing it. Whereas with other forms of assessment… we got a lot of extra help… But nothing for this… We were then expected to produce this piece of coursework for [our] assessment without any further help… But they've just thrown you in the deep end and expect you to know how to write like that."

"I feel like some modules just prepare you better in a sense that they just have lectures where they go over previous exam papers."

"I think often we get given a rubric or we get a generalised: 'This 82. This is 85, [or] whatever grade.' And the descriptions for them never really fit the exact assignment, they're just very general. And even for a First, you need a sound understanding of

something. I don't know what the hell that's meant to mean! A sound understanding of content? [That] can be interpreted in such a different way. And we might think something is a sound understanding but a lecturer will probably disagree with us."

"Some of my lecturers will basically add slides to the end of their lectures where they'll give you some questions or something like ... the main points that you need to know for that lecture. So, I thought a good idea for that would be to incorporate basically that summary slide, those key points that you need to know... And it'd be good if every lecturer could do that because some lecturers do it, some don't obviously."

Post-assessment support: Feedback

Students reported that inconsistencies were also present in the assessment feedback that they received across modules. With regards to written feedback, there was some confusion among the group as to what was being assessed and where they needed to improve. Students wanted feedback that clearly distinguished between what we might describe as more significant grade-determining improvements (such as structure, content, evidence, critical thinking) and stylistic improvements – although these are not mutually exclusive in all cases. Students also wanted clearer feedback for improvement on their assignments, and even for times when they were awarded 60 percent and above, as the following comment indicates.

"I got a 2:1 last semester on it. Every point that he'd made on the marking, on the actual work was saying 'this was good'. But then the overall feedback was 'you just didn't explain this one term', and that was it... So, that makes me wonder where the other 30 marks have gone. For me to only get a 2:1, and for him only give me that feedback. So, when I came to do... another module, this semester, I had nothing to go off of because I got a 2:1 with no feedback. So I don't know how I was meant to improve on something like that."

However, negative experiences of written feedback were juxtaposed with extremely positive experiences of face to face or oral feedback. Students described this form of feedback as clear, and as feedback that provided them with instruction on not just what they needed to improve, but also provided guidance on how to improve, and what this might look like.

"Yes, I find as well when you actually have a face to face, sit down tutorial with the person about the assessment it makes such a big difference. We have approached members of staff and been like, well we don't feel like we've got any help for this. And they are like, oh well we put an example on Blackboard, or we've put a guideline on Blackboard, the rubric's up."

"It's like, well that can be interpreted in so many different ways, it makes such a big difference when you actually sit down and tell them they need to explain it to you face to face. And you can actually ask them questions about it rather than just bombarding them with email after email."

The accounts also illustrate remarkable levels of confidence among students who were comfortable challenging their lecturers on the grades and the support that was available on the course. This also displays a level of entitlement which was not apparent among the black and South Asian biology students in this study.

Sociology focus groups

Black sociology student focus group

Types of assessment

The black sociology students in our study largely preferred written coursework and essays over other forms of assessment. This was partly due to their greater familiarity with essay writing in general, and more specifically, a greater familiarity with what was expected from them to achieve higher level grade outcomes in this form of assessment. This was largely because coursework had been the most frequent way in which they had been tested during their time at college and now at university. Students also pointed to the fact that the process of essay writing gave them more room to reflect on the question, and to develop, edit and redraft their work. This enabled them to produce work that they were more confident could secure a higher level grade score.

By contrast, black students displayed a lower sense of efficacy when it came to exams. This was despite a similarly long history and exposure to this form of testing. Unlike essays, however, exams were viewed as a 'one-shot' form of assessment. In turn, it represented a riskier forum for illustrating subject knowledge and for achieving success (or desired grade-score). Additionally, students argued that they were less clear on what higher-grade exam responses looked like. Lastly, their lower confidence about this type of assessment method was also tied to the fact that many had not performed well in exams at university, or in the past. Below are some examples of comments in this area:

> "I think I enjoy doing assignments. I feel like there's that structure that we're all aware of now because it's obviously been three years of doing it, so there's that comfortability of knowing what you are doing."

> "I prefer normal essay assignments because I feel that it gives me the time to go and do the research that I need to do. It also allows me to take my time when I'm doing it."

> "I think [in] terms of why I struggled with exams... I wasn't sure how to actually answer [the] questions properly. I was never really sure what they were actually looking for."

> "With exams, it really comes down to you building up to this one moment..."

Perceptions of dissertations

Black sociology students viewed dissertations as a rare opportunity in their studies to explore issues which related directly to their own lived realities and on what

they were 'passionate about'. Often, they wanted to explore issues relating to race or ethnicity. They argued that exploring something that they were 'passionate about' made them inclined to read more, study harder and produce higher quality work.

However, dissertations were also a source of anxiety. Pointing to a lack of BAME staff, and to lack of what they felt were BAME-interested staff (as reflected in the curriculum), they explained that they were not always confident that their supervisors were comfortable, willing, or qualified to supervise race-based dissertations. Clearly, finding a supervisor who was racially, professionally, or genuinely interested in their research area was a significant stressor here, and was argued to be central to having a favourable or less favourable experience, and positive grade outcome.

> "I felt a sense of comfort as well when I went in to meet my supervisor for the first time and I did see that [they were] black basically. That's what I was really scared of... That was a huge fear for me. If it was a white person, I don't feel like they would have understood what I was saying or what I'm trying to get across. But then just as soon as I saw that person was of black origin, I just felt this sense of relief and that okay yes, maybe I can actually do well in this."

> "[Doing your dissertation] It definitely is about having a passion about the topic. Even what we were talking about before with whether your supervisor's race influences that. I think it can but it may not in the sense that just as long as that person has that passion. That's just the driving force for success."

> "If I had someone that wasn't of a black ethnicity, then they wouldn't know what would be considered sensitive in a dissertation basically. So yes, there was a huge relief when I realised that this person is obviously of a similar race to me, and even comes from the same area that I was brought up in. So, it really helped."

> "I feel like as a dissertation when you're doing it you need to make sure you're picking something that you're passionate about... A lot of students that aren't enjoying the dissertation, I feel like it's because they've picked something that they're not passionate about."

Pre-assessment guidance and feedback

Academics at Leicester are generally encouraged to employ a wide range of assessments within modules that benefit all learners. However, students felt that when confronted with unfamiliar assessments, in some cases they were given little practical and useful support and instruction. This was especially the case when introduced to unfamiliar tasks, such as conducting a research project (e.g. writing a literature review, methodology, etc.), blog writing, critical reflections, portfolios, and so on.

> "I think last year I was doing [a module] and we had to break it down into a literature review and methodology and things like that. We had never done anything like that before. Yet again, there was that assumption that we should just know what we are doing. Even when I did ask for help, I was confused still."

> "For that module it literally was assumed that we would know what to write. We didn't know how much we were meant to write and what style we were meant to write in."

> "For example, a portfolio in one module isn't going to be the same as a portfolio in another module. I feel that's what the issue is, as well. Because I could have previously done a portfolio in one module, but the next one is asking me for something different, and presenting it differently as well. So, if I don't know how to do it, then I'm obviously going to get a bad grade. Because, first of all it's not something I'm used to, and I wouldn't know how to structure it. So, providing an example would probably just remove all the issues."

Black students were also concerned about what they argued to be a lack of consistency or support to address specific types of assessment:

"I feel like it was only this year when other lecturers... actually showed us what a first-class essay looks like. Just things like that is helpful because let's say in secondary school A-level, you're provided with mark schemes throughout the year. You're provided with what an A grade essay is meant to look like. So, just with that it actually shows you, okay this is what I'm not doing. This is what I need to do. We don't have that. It's almost like you're just left in the dark."

In terms of written feedback, participants described several issues with regards to grading and feedback, including that written feedback was too subjective, not clearly linked to grading criteria, or it could be too vague.

"[I] don't feel that it's very clear, because on the mark schemes, the words are so generic... [Y]ou have 'good', 'very good' and 'great'. But it's like where is th[e] distinction? It's subjective, really and truly."

Awareness of racial inequalities in assessment

The students in this focus group showed a remarkably high level of awareness of the structural and everyday inequalities that shaped their lives as black people in all social spaces including education, and specifically here, in relation to award outcomes. As such, black sociology students wanted anonymous marking in all forms of assessment where possible, because they felt this provided more chance of being judged fairly and without bias. Black students appeared to be apprehensive of assessments where they could be identified. This was not due to a low self-confidence or doubt in their own abilities, but to what they saw as the impact of a racialised capital which shaped performances expected by predominantly white and middle-class assessors.

They argued that grade awards were influenced, even at times determined, by their ability to successfully employ or 'switch' language and symbolic codes, and present themselves as what they described as 'non-typically' black. Put simply, they believe that in assessments where they are visible to assessors, they felt that their grades were determined by the content of their work and their ability to perform according to white middle-class cultural norms and values. In this way, students were conscious

of the myriad ways in which their raced identities and cultural values might work against them in educational spaces and outcomes – and visibility in assessments limited their capacity to mitigate this reality. Again, some examples are offered here:

"Sometimes, I think in general, just being black you can be put in a disadvantage in society just in general. So, that puts you at an advantage to be anonymous when you're sending your work in."

"[I]t's always been the case where when I've done my GCSEs or my A-levels, my family's always like, make sure you pray that the person marking your work isn't racist."

"[White students] do better because of that… I don't want to say well-spoken or anything like that, but just…it's just like a different kind of vibe… I think it's just about how you're perceived by people in society in general. So, if you're viewed as that stereotypical black person, you're not going to do as well…"

"I think with the whole handing in your work with just your student number, I think that puts you at an advantage in a sense that you're not limited…It doesn't matter what colour you are, what gender you are, it's more just this is your work. And this is how it's going to be marked up."

White sociology student focus group

Types of assessment

Generally, white sociology students appeared to enjoy all forms of assessment. Essays and coursework appeared to be most popular because they provided the most space for students to develop answers and express ideas and knowledge fully. These sociology students also enjoyed presentations, especially the synchronous and instant dialogue nature of this type of work. Students appreciated that they were able to recover errors and show wider knowledge in their responses to assessors' questions and probes, and in real time.

"For me, the 3000-word essays. The 3000 or 4000-word essays. I like doing them. They're long enough that you can get out all you want to say and you've got enough time because it's coursework.

"I prefer oral presentations, actually. Because I feel like, when you write something down, that is set in stone, but, when you have an oral presentation, then, if something goes wrong, you can always answer questions from whoever is watching you, whoever is assessing you."

Portfolios were the least preferred assessment method here – this was a combination of reports, blogs, critical reflections, coursework and so on. Much of this stemmed from a confusion as to what a portfolio was and the fact that no two portfolios consisted of the same set of tasks.

Perceptions on dissertations

White students generally had positive views of dissertations, which had increased with the new option of working closely with a supervisor on a pre-existing research project. White students felt confident that their topic of choice would be supported and that the demographic make-up of the faculty meant that any research area which they wanted to explore, had suitably qualified members of staff to act as supervisors. The only concerns for students here was the challenge of managing a year-long project while juggling other university commitments at the same time.

"I'm really looking forward to [the dissertation], and especially with the new options of working with a lecturer or a local organisation and things like that. That's really got me excited about thinking [about] what can I do? My major fear at the moment is timing and just not being able to think of something which is good enough."

Pre-assessment guidance and feedback

Students argued that when they were introduced to assignments that were alien to them, they were more-often-than-not expected to empathically know how to do them or expected to learn on the job. They speculated that figuring out what to, and what not to do, seemed to be what some lecturers thought was part of the learning processes: A view which they disagreed and rejected. Students called for more extensive, clearer and module

specific guidance for all assignments including those which they had done at school or in college.

Students argued that on some modules, the level and type of pre-assessment support and guidance had been excellent, but that this was dependent on the individual module convener. For them, good practice included being provided with examples of previous work, provided with a 'to do list', briefed on common mistakes and given exercises, such as marking previous work against the grade criteria to illustrate how and why work had scored the way it had.

"We did a module... last year, and you have to design a... poster. And that, none of us knew what we were doing with that. And the lecturer wasn't clear on it either, [The lecturer] wasn't guiding us on what we were meant to do. It was like, oh, just do what you think is best. And it was like, no, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm not a graphic designer, I'm doing sociology."

"[W]e're meant to do a blog, a write-up blog, but [the lecturer] didn't really say what kind of blog [they] wanted. [They] wanted it to be informative. And then [they] wanted some reference[s]."

"I think it's very much based on the lecturer or the module leader. Sometimes, when introducing a new topic, they've been amazing, and a new assessment, they'll explain it completely. They'll give

examples. They'll show you other things. And it kind of just clicks. Okay, I understand this now. I get where I can be creative in it and I get where I have to be rigid."

"I think [they] was brilliant. Before the exam, [the lecturer] had a specific exam session and [they] went, so, 'this is how many people got firsts. This is how many people got 2:1s', etc. 'This is where the majority of people messed up. This is what they did wrong....' But [the lecturer] clearly went over it and said, 'this is where people mess up. This is an example of a good piece of work that I've had over the past few years.' And [they]'d go through that really in detail. And that's my best ever exam to date."

Unhelpful guidance included instruction that lacked guidance on the specific assignment task. It also included what we might describe as 'passive' modelling exercises. For example, students spoke of staff making previous 'good' scripts available. However, students pointed out that what made these essays 'good' or 'bad' was not always obvious to them. Instead, they called for more 'hands on' or active exercises, which made clear what it was that made work successful and how this related to the marking criteria.

White sociology students reported that their successes in assignment performance was significantly influenced by useful feedback. However, like guidance, their experiences of feedback were uneven. Written feedback, for example, was reported to often leave them unsure of how to improve their work. It often highlighted what was lacking in work, but frequently failed to clearly illustrate how to improve future pieces of work in a user-friendly and accessible way. This elaboration was more typically provided and accessed through oral feedback. This, however, requires the students to approach staff and fails to recognise the potential imbalances of power in such interactions.

"I think more examples should be provided of past work. [But] sometimes when people do that, they don't tell you what they're actually graded on. They just say, this was a good piece of work. And I'm like, I don't know what that means."

"I feel like, when I hand in a good piece of work, then the feedback is useful, because it tells me what I've done well. But, when I hand in a bad piece of work, they just tell me, oh, you haven't done this. They don't tell me how to do it better. So, I feel like, if I didn't do it well, there was a reason, and it was because I didn't know how to do it better. So, if you're telling me this is missing, I know this is missing, I've written this piece of work. But why is it missing? How do I do it? Because, clearly, I wasn't able to do it before, so I wouldn't be able to do it after you're feedback as well, so it's not really useful."

Awareness of racial inequalities in assessment

Some white students illustrated an impressive level of self-awareness when it came to race and class, and related privileges in education. They were conscious of some of the ways that their raced and classed identities meant that they could explore all aspects of their lives in the dissertation and importantly easily relate and apply their realities to the curriculum. They were aware that the same thing did not always apply to other students.

"I feel like, because I'm white, middle-class and British, the questions are always geared towards me. Whereas I feel like other people might not feel that..."

Law focus groups

White law student focus group

Types of assessment

The focus group of white law students displayed a noticeable preference for exam-based assignments. This was largely due to better performances in exams during their time in HE. It was also linked to what we might describe as a more historic familiarity with this assessment type, which dated back to their time in compulsory and further education. It was also favoured because exams were scheduled at the end of the semester and usually some weeks after teaching had finished. This meant that students had a clearer idea of when to start planning, preparing and revising.

Lastly, preferences were also linked to the fact that this was the assessment type in which they had historically enjoyed the most successes. This had either installed or shored up their belief that the pedagogical skills required for exam-based assessments more directly aligned with what they thought were their own 'natural strengths'.

> "College was pure exams with a little bit of coursework."

> "I think during my time here at the university, I've had better grades in exams than I have assessments at home."

> "I've always just found exams a bit easier... It's all done within a three-hour exam. I've got plenty of time to revise for them..."

The only assessment students uniformly disliked was group-based work. This was considered to be an inherently unfair mode of assessment, as individuals' effort and input were not weighted or disaggregated, and thus grade scores were seen to be outside of the individual's control and relied too heavily on the performance of others.

> "100% I hate group work. It's the most useless piece of university that they do by far."

> "Some members of your team won't do anything, and some members that do something might do it wrong, or don't try hard enough. And then, it ends up being a very one-sided... Or, maybe two people try, and then the rest don't. So, it becomes very useless."

Award-based advantages of being able to relate assessment and the curriculum to their own lived experiences

Some white students noted that they could relate their assessments, and curriculum content more broadly, to their own lived experiences. Importantly, they claimed that this relatability enabled them to be able

to better comprehend content, revise and for ideas to stick. Moreover, this connection could assist them in understanding an assignment task, to better synthesise an answer, or add a critical dimension to their answers, and in turn achieve a higher grade score.

> "If you read something, you might be able to put your own personal experience in it to make sense of it."

> "I just found a lot of the issues within the topics to be just a lot more interesting. So, it was a lot more easy when it came to revision, to study them."

Pre-assessment guidance and feedback

Students suggested that they were often confused by the assessment criteria and unsure of what was expected in assessments. This was applicable to assessments that they were unfamiliar with upon arrival to HE. It was also applicable to assessments that they had done at FE but which were noticeably different at HE. Some felt that they had to learn 'how to do an assignment (well)' via trial and error. For many, this was a long and steep learning curve, which could last between 2 and 3 years. It was also a costly process in terms of assessment performance which, as discussed above, can have a direct impact on students' confidence in particular assessments types.

> "I'm in my third year now. I feel like third year is the first year where I've known what's expected of me. I think partly that's because it's took me three years to fully adapt to the level which is required at university. I think it was quite a big jump going from college to university."

> "I think it took me a long time to really get the knack of what I'm supposed to do and how I'm supposed to do it, and the style of writing, I think the general level of intelligence. I think it took me three years to understand what that really is, and get the best out of my assessments, to get the best grades possible."

Against this, students called for more even pre-assessment support across modules, which included being provided with examples of previous work, given exercises which help them become more familiar with the grading criteria, and shown how to use feedback in future work.

> "I'd want an example essay, definitely. An example first essay. What it was meant to be. So that I could comparatively look at what I did. And that way, you could see what you would have added, as opposed to what deducted marks from your work, so to speak."

Students also felt that feedback was important for grade performance and improvement. However, their experiences here were also mixed, with some excellent and some less helpful practices. They described their experiences of helpful written feedback as clear,

concise, constructive and focused on what they needed to improve and what this looked like. It was less focused on what they had done well. It also provided clear explanations for how feedback applies and improves future work. Conversely, they described less helpful feedback as verbose, opaque, coached in impenetrable language and overly descriptive. Consequently, participants felt that they would benefit from more consistent levels of feedback across modules and lecturers, as the comments below indicate.

> "A lot of criticisms, which is what you need in feedback. It's no good telling me what I've done well, really. I'd rather know what I've done wrong and how to better develop."

> "Feedback was very helpful and showing me where I've gone wrong, and how to focus a bit more and get more marks out of the question. So, yes, I think the feedback was very helpful. It was quite detailed feedback rather than vague."

> "I think sometimes some people's feedback is not as good others', so it's hard. Sometimes it's quite vague to apply to the next piece of work. It can be quite difficult. Some people really get the detail and feedback, and I find that easier in the next one. But then, I think again it's took me to third year to know fully how to utilise that feedback and do better."

Black law student focus group

Types of assessment

Exams were the preferred assessment type among the black law students in this study. Students felt that exams at HE were very similar to what they had experienced when they were in secondary and further education. Consequently, students stated that they had a clearer idea of what was required in an exam as undergraduates and why they were more confident in securing a higher-grade outcome here than when compared to other forms of assessments.

Their preference also stemmed from the fact that exams were scheduled at the end of the semester and usually some weeks after teaching had finished. This meant they could better compartmentalise assessment preparation around other commitments to work and to family, and around issues related to commuting from outside of Leicester, for some. The final point is of pertinence, given that we know students from 'black' households are more likely to need to find income to supplement their studies, or more likely to commute to university from home (in some cases, outside of Leicester).

"I prefer exams. I feel like I'm better at preparing for them. I can have my timetable and I know what I need to do."

"I prefer exams over assignments because I feel like with the assignments it's hard to stick to the time…. Simply because, as well as trying to complete an assignment, I have other things to do like attending lectures, preparing for tutorial stuff. It's a lot."

Students noted that the difference between what was required in coursework at FE and HE was significant. Students in turn complained that upon entry to HE, they were often unfamiliar with the basic expectations of essay writing as undergraduates, such as writing assignments that were in excess of 3,000 words, referencing, structure, style and terminology (such as discuss, evaluate, critically assess, and so on). All this required a much steeper learning curve.

"I think sometimes essays. When you're set essays, they can be more difficult because sometimes the questions they might be, for example, a quote from a case or something. But you might find that a bit more difficult than if it was an exam, because you have to answer that. Whereas in the exam you have more choice. So, I'd say essays can be more difficult in that sense, you're limited."

"…Essays – I haven't necessarily been used to sitting down, writing down 3,000 words at once, or 2,000 words. Whereas exams, you know okay, you've got

an hour to answer this question. It's just instilled in you from secondary school. So, you've got that preparation."

Essays and coursework tasks were viewed as being less straightforward and more counter-intuitive than exams. In turn, these forms of assessment represented a higher risk avenue for adverse marks. For example, students felt that essay questions were not always clear or were often phrased in such a way that required deconstructing or 'working out' first. Students bemoaned that this meant that there was a higher chance of providing an answer that did not respond directly to the question set, and in turn, a higher chance of them receiving a low(er) grade-award. This raises important pedagogical questions around the objective of this type of assessment. Is it to test student ability to work out questions or to demonstrate knowledge learnt on the module?

Additionally, participants felt that essays were marked in a more subjective way than with exams. This subjectivity was seen to be reflected in a lack of consistency between what was commented on, and thus interpreted as valuable, by different markers. Accounts of some markers overlooking spelling mistakes and others flagging – and possibly penalising – these kinds of discrepancies were used to evidence their conclusions. For them, grade scores were dependent on the preferences of the individual marker as much as they were on the content. Such inconsistencies were seen to be unfair. Thus, essays were viewed to be unsafe ground for those seeking high scores, especially when compared to exams.

"I think yes, you can definitely come across some inconsistencies. You might find one tutor is particularly focused on spelling, punctuation and grammar. Whereas another one is more focused on your referencing. Someone might care about how many cases you've put in. I feel like it really depends on what that tutor looks for, and that can impact what grade you're given."

Pre-assessment guidance and feedback

Students felt that pre-assessment support was central to their ability to achieve well, and praised instances where they had received this kind of support. They particularly welcomed preparatory hand-outs, detailed guidance materials and workshops around specific assessments. However, they also noted that this was inconsistent across modules.

"One particular person from first year that I would say that really does go above and beyond. Not only are the handouts amazing, but they have... these sessions where you can just drop in and speak about their topic, their subject area and you can ask them anything about it. And that went all the way from September, right up to our exams."

"I think maybe you could have a model example of a First. And then show where you went wrong in your essay."

"If you gave me a sample of what a good essay look[ed] like, then I guess I could consult that and measure and compare with."

With regards to feedback, students felt that this was also essential for development and achieving higher grade outcomes. However, here too they described inconsistencies in the feedback they received. For example, effective written feedback was detailed and clear and provided examples of ways to improve future assessments. Less helpful written feedback was described as when instructions for improvement were descriptive or unclear.

"The feedback literally would just be like, 'good, poor, explain, not detailed, scanty.' One word. What does that mean? What is that?

"I think one lecturer in particular is really good with feedback."

"[In-]Depth feedback. So, you might get comments like, okay this sentence doesn't make sense. All right, but can you tell me how I can make it better? What do I need to do to make it better? And then others will say okay, yes this doesn't make sense. Or you could have said this, instead of that. You could have mentioned this case as well as what you've mentioned because what you've mentioned is good, you could add this to make it even better."

Final comments

The task of addressing and eradicating racial inequalities in assessment is a significant one. Implementing this project's recommendations will undoubtedly improve our practice greatly in all measurable ways. It is an important first step. However, it alone will not achieve our objective fully.

This is, in effect, the beginning and not conclusion of a conversation and process where we, as academics and educators, begin to meaningfully reflect on, and evolve, our assessment practices, processes and related pedagogies, with the aim of making them fully inclusive and fit for a 21st century and global student body.

Lastly, the recommendations provided throughout this report will help to create conditions in which the quantitative and qualitative experience of assessment, including outcomes, will improve for all students regardless of their race or ethnic background. Racially inclusive practice is best practice.

"It is an important first step. However, it alone will not achieve our objective fully."

References

– Arday, J. and Mirza, H.S. (eds.) Dismantling race in higher education: Racism, whiteness and decolonising the academy. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

– Beaumont, C., O'Doherty, M. & Shannon, L. (2011) 'Reconceptualising assessment feedback: a key to improving student learning?' Studies in Higher Education 36(6): 671-687.

– Bhambra, K. G, Gebrial, D and Nişancıoğlu, k. (eds) (2018) Decolonising the university. London: Pluto Press.

– Bhopal, K., (2018). White Privilege. The Myth Of A Post-Racial Society. Bristol: The Policy Press.

– Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T. (2007) Ethnicity and Degree Attainment. DfES Research Report RW92. London: DfES.

– Campbell, P. I. (2015) 'A ('black') historian using sociology to write a history of 'black' sport: A critical reflection' Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 377-394.

– Campbell, P.I. (2016) Football, Ethnicity and Community: The life of an African-Caribbean football club Oxford: Peter Lang.

– Campbell, P.I. (2019) "That black boy's a different class': Race, class and local football in Leicester c. 1980 – 2010' Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2019.1590028

– Campbell, P.I. (2020a) Education training, retirement and career transition for ex-professional footballers: 'From being idolised to stacking shelves' Bingley: Emerald.

– Campbell. P. I (2020b) 'Race Equality and Higher Education: Why have sociologists argued that UK universities should 'decolonise' the curriculum in all subjects for the benefit of all their students?' Sociological Review.

– Connor, H., C.Tyers, T.Modood, and J.Hillage. (2004) Why the Difference? A Closer Look at Higher Education Minority Ethnic Students and Graduates (Research Report No. 552). London: Department for Education and Skills.

– Cousin, G. & Cureton, D. (2012). Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA), Higher Education Academy; York.

– HESA (2019) Higher education student statistics. Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2019/sb252-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers (Accessed: 3 March 2020).

– Le Grange, L. (2018) 'Decolonising, Africanising, indigenising, and internationalising curriculum studies: Opportunities to (re)imagine the field', Journal of Education, (74).

– MacNell, L., A.Driscoll, and A. N.Hunt. (2015) "What's in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching." Innovative Higher Education 40 (4), pp.291–303.

– Mahmud, A and Gagnon, J. (2020) "Racial disparities in student outcomes in British higher education: examining Mindsets and bias" Teaching in Higher Education DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2020.1796619

– Mengel, F., J.Sauermann, and U.Zölitz, (2018) "Gender Bias in Teaching Evaluations" Journal of the European Economic Association 17 (2) pp535–566.

– Mignolo, W.D. (2009) 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom', Theory, Culture & Society, 26(7-8), pp. 159-181.

– Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sabri, D., Moore, J., Sanders, J., Jones, S. and Higham, L. (2015) Causes of differences in student outcomes. Report to HEFCE by King's College London, ARC Network and The University of Manchester. Bristol: HEFCE. Available at http://212.159.59.108/pdf/minority_ethnic_students_in_higher_education_rr448.pdf (Accessed: 12 March 2020).

– NUS (2011) Race For Equality [online]. Available at www. nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12350/NUS_Race_for_Equality_web.pdf (NUS (2011) Race For Equality [online]. Available At www. us.org.uk/PageFiles/12350/NUS_Race_for_Equality_web.pdf (Accessed 8 March, 2020).

– NUS (2019) Black, Asian and Minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: closing the gap. Available: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf Accessed 10 March 2020.

– Peters, M.A. (2018) 'Why is my curriculum white? A brief genealogy of resistance', in Arday, J. and Mirza, H.S. (eds.) Dismantling race in higher education: Racism, whiteness and decolonising the academy. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

– Pilkington, A. (2018) 'The rise and fall in the salience of race inequality in higher education,' in Bhambra, K. G, Gebrial, D and Nişancıoğlu, k. (eds) Decolonising the university. London: Pluto Press.

– Richardson, J. (2008) Degree attainment, ethnicity and gender: a literature review. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: http://oro.open.ac.uk/11535/1/11535.pdf (Accessed: 15 March 2020).

– Richardson, J.T.E. (2012) 'The attainment of white and ethnic minority students in distance education', Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education. 37(4), pp. 393-408.

– Richardson, J.T.E. (2015) 'The under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education: what we know and what we don't know', Journal of Further and Higher Education, 39(2), pp. 278-291.

– Richardson, J.T.E. (2018) 'Understanding the under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK Higher Education: The known knowns and the unknown unknowns', in Arday, J. and Mirza, H.S. (eds.) Dismantling race in higher education: Racism, whiteness and decolonising the academy. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 87-102.

– Richardson, J.T.E., Alden Rivers, B. and Whitelock, D. (2015) 'The role of feedback in the under-attainment of ethnic minority students: evidence from distance education', Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 40(4), pp. 557-573.

– Singh, G. (2011) Black and minority ethnic (BME) students' participation in higher education: improving retention and success: A synthesis of research evidence. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/35801866/Black_and_minority_ethnic_BME_students_participation_in_higher_education_improving_retention_and_success (Accessed: 15 March, 2020).

– The Open University, (2019) The Innovating Pedagogy 2019 Exploring new forms of teaching, learning and assessment, to guide educators and policy makers, report, January 2019, https://iet.open.ac.uk/file/innovating-pedagogy-2019.pdf (Accessed: 12 March 2020).

– Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student attainment at UK universities: #Closing the gap (2019). Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf (Accessed: 12 March 2020).

"The task of addressing and eradicating racial inequalities in assessment is a significant one."

/uniofleicester   uniofleicester   @uniofleicester